

# Fight the Odds and Become Invincible: The Depiction of Human Resilience in *I Am Legend*

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## ABSTRACT

The research paper “Fight the Odds and Become Invincible: The Depiction of Human Resilience in *I Am Legend*” illustrates a discourse related to human resilience in the face of a pandemic. The paper explores human resilience in the face of the pandemic through two trajectories namely physical and psychological. The context is provided by the film *I Am Legend* (2007) which helps to examine the various parameters related to human resilience such as ability to cope effectively with internal and external stresses, a dynamic process characterized by positive adaptation to significant adversity and finally, the negotiations between individuals and their environments to define them as healthy amidst adverse conditions. *I Am Legend* is a film directed by Francis Lawrence and is based on the 1954 novel of Richard Matheson of the same name. The film is a post-apocalyptic thriller and revolves around a US Army virologist Robert Neville. The film is set in New York City after the spread of a mutant strain of measles virus which was originally created as a cure for cancer but is instrumental in causing a pandemic wiping out 90% of mankind except for those who are naturally immuned to the virus. Among the humans who have been afflicted by the virus, there are some survivors who are nocturnal mutants called the “Darkseekers”. Lt. Col. Robert Neville works and develops a cure for the virus thereby saving humanity from the pandemic. The film is a media text foregrounding the politics of human resilience in the form of a cure for the genetically re-engineered measles virus that causes the pandemic. The cure is developed in the context of a particular scientific discursive formation which is historically situated in relation to the society and culture of the times and is acceptable to the established power structure of the day. The “Darkseekers” who have become nocturnal mutants after being afflicted by the virus are dominated and excluded as the “other” or “sick” by the monolithic power structure of which Lt. Col. Robert Neville is a part. The film projects a discourse that is significant during the contemporary times of COVID-19, a pandemic which calls for human resilience for its effective extermination.

## Keywords:

Discourse, human resilience, pandemic, post-apocalyptic thriller, nocturnal mutants, monolithic power structure etcetera.

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## Introduction:

The film *I Am Legend* (2007) is an American post-apocalyptic thriller which is based on Richard Matheson’s novel named *I Am Legend* (1954). It revolves around a virologist in the US Army Lt. Col. Dr. Robert Neville who gets caught in the vortex of a pandemic that is caused by a genetically re-engineered measles virus developed as a cure for cancer by Dr. Alice Krippin. The sequence of events takes a fatal turn when the genetically re-engineered measles virus turns lethal and brings mankind to the brink of extinction, killing about 90% of human population, turning 9.8% into albino zombie like cannibalistic mutants called

“Darkseekers” who are extremely vulnerable to the ultraviolet rays of the sun and avoid sunlight and the rest of the human population about 0.2% are immune to the virus but are prey to the mutants. The film is set in New York City. Dr. Robert Neville is shown to lead an isolated existence in the quarantined Manhattan, New York City as he had lost his family, that is, his wife and daughter in a helicopter crash after Manhattan is quarantined due to the spread of the deadly virus. He spends the next three years finding a cure for the deadly disease caused by the Krippin virus, named after Dr. Alice Krippin who created it. Since Lt. Col. Dr. Robert Neville has immunity against the virus, he is trying

to find a cure for it through his own blood. He has Samantha, the German Shepherd dog, to give him company during the days of his isolation and loneliness at the time of the quarantine but he loses Samantha too in an encounter with the “Darkseekers”. He meets two other survivors Anna Montez and Ethan. Both of them have natural immunity against the disease and they spent days harbored on a Red Cross ship in Philadelphia. They tracked Lt. Col. Dr. Robert Neville through his recorded broadcasts and also saved him during an onslaught of the “Darkseekers”. He adjusts the potential cure for the disease by injecting it into the body of the female mutant that he had captured to make her a test subject. The last treatment that is given to the female mutant is successful. Dr. Robert Neville draws a vial of blood from the female mutant whom he has cured and gives it to Anna Montez and Ethan and shuts them up in a coal chute before self-destructing himself with a grenade thereby killing the other “Darkseekers” who had attacked his house in their search for the female mutant but saving the precious cure for which he had been working for the past three years. The discourse that is embedded in the media text *I Am Legend* (2007) is that of human resilience in the face of a pandemic caused by the genetically re-engineered measles virus which kills 90% of the human population and creates nocturnal mutants called “Darkseekers”. Human resilience may be defined as the ability to face adverse circumstances and positively adapting to those circumstances. The film is about resilience displayed by Lt. Col. Dr. Robert Neville, an Afro-American subject in the mainstream American society who is also a virologist, in the face of all physical and psychological odds caused by the pandemic. In this case, it is adult resilience of Lt. Col. Dr. Robert Neville that is projected. Anna Montez and Ethan too are shown to be subjects exhibiting resilience, the former a woman with natural immunity just like Dr. Neville and the latter a child with the same natural immunity in him. Both show the same kind of human resilience as Dr. Robert Neville in terms of surviving through the pandemic. On the periphery are the mutants who too show resilience

in terms of surviving through the pandemic (*I Am Legend*).

### Discourse in the Media Text and It's Analysis:

Human resilience may be defined as the power of an individual to thrive in the face of serious stress or extreme adversity thereby showing a positive development in terms of physical and mental health after a prolonged period of exposure to risk (*Current Theories relating to Resilience and Young People*). In the media text *I Am Legend*, the efforts of Lt. Col. Dr. Robert Neville to develop a cure for the genetically re-engineered measles virus which is called Krippin virus after the scientist Dr. Alice Krippin who had produced it in laboratory conditions as a cure for cancer but it unfortunately turns lethal thereby causing the pandemic, wiping out 90% of the human population and turning 0.2% of the humans into “Darkseekers”. Dr. Neville has to survive in isolation and loneliness during the quarantine in Manhattan trying to produce a cure out of his own blood as he is naturally immuned to the virus. He has to keep the “Darkseekers” too at bay while he researches for a cure. The stress that he experiences is that he has to survive during the pandemic with no support structure whatsoever. He is continuously exposed to the risk of falling prey to the “Darkseekers” if he ventures out into the dark. The risk is further described by an incident when Samantha follows a deer into a building, Dr. Neville too follows them cautiously into the same building, finds the deer's corpse and Samantha but the building is infested by the “Darkseekers”. Both Dr. Neville and Samantha by a stroke of good luck escape unhurt but the attacking “Darkseekers” are killed by their exposure to the sunlight. Thus, the risk here is manifold. The physical risk is in the form of the virus and the “Darkseekers” whereas the psychological risk is in the form of the fear due to the raging pandemic as well as the mutants lurking in the dark interiors of the abandoned buildings. Dr. Neville and Samantha have been braving these odds since a long time, a period of three years. The positive development is presented in the form of the survival tactics used by Dr. Neville in surviving during the stressful times of

the pandemic which includes experimenting on infected rats to find a cure for the virus, searching for food and supplies and waiting each day expectantly for immune humans who may respond to his continuous recorded radio broadcasts instructing them to meet him during midday at South Street Seaport. Dr. Neville's continuous search for immune humans in Manhattan that is now a solitary desert and the coming in of Anna Montez, a Brazilian survivor, and Ethan thereby forming a community of immune human beings including Dr. Neville is a positive development of greater magnitude. Moreover, their collective search for a cure displays "community resilience" ("Resilience an Evolving Concept: A Review of Literature Relevant to Aboriginal Research") since their natural immunity towards Krippin virus and their unity in terms of their purpose to find a cure for the disease make them members of the same community. The same concept of "community resilience" ("Resilience an Evolving Concept: A Review of Literature Relevant to Aboriginal Research") is also relevant in the case of the mutants who are called "Darkseekers" as they form their own communities living in the dark interiors of the skyscrapers, hunting in packs, venturing out on to the streets in hordes during the night time and surviving through the pandemic on the basis of their vampiric and cannibalistic instincts. Their vulnerability to sunlight does not allow them to expose themselves to the light. It is a different kind of survival for them (*I Am Legend*).

The two trajectories that are usually explored in relation to human resilience are namely the physical and the psychological (*Current Theories relating to Resilience and Young People*). In this media text, the two trajectories related to human resilience are portrayed not only through Dr. Neville but also through Anna Montez and Ethan. If the examples of Anna Montez and Ethan are taken, then, the physical resilience is depicted in their cases by their survival aboard the Red Cross ship when harbored in Philadelphia after the city had been overrun by the pandemic. Basically, she and Ethan are humans having natural immunity so when other survivors aboard the ship fall prey to

the disease and die they are the only two human beings who survive. Their resilience is not only physical but also psychological as though battered by the pandemic they have the mental strength to respond to the recorded broadcasts of Dr. Neville by tracing him to Manhattan and also rescuing him during an encounter he has with the hordes of mutants in the dark (*I Am Legend*).

Professor Sir Michael Rutter (1933-) who is a professor of child psychiatry has done his research related to resilience since the late 1970s to the present times in the field of resilience in children but his research findings can be extended to the adults as well. He defines resilience as ordinary adaptation given the right resources. Resilience depends on acting of risk factors and protective factors on an individual in a particular condition. The theory hinges on the combination of serious risk experiences and the relatively positive physical (my addition) and psychological outcome despite those experiences, brief exposure to risks which act as steeling events, mental features such as planning, self-control, self-reflection, sense of agency, self-confidence and determination influence resilience, turning point effects can influence resilience, individual differences such as genetics, personality and temperament influence resilience and the social relationships too affect resilience (*Current Theories relating to Resilience and Young People*). Lt. Col. Dr. Robert Neville from the media text has been discussed as a classic case of human resilience, hence, the title of the media text is "I Am Legend" because the life story of the protagonist Dr. Neville is the legend as he is the one who produces the cure for Krippin virus which will ultimately end the pandemic and he does so after battling all kinds of odds. Dr. Neville even gives up his life trying to develop the cure and to keep it safe from the mutants. The risk factors that act upon him are the pandemic caused by Krippin virus, the threat of the "Darkseekers" on his life and his loneliness due to the loss of his family. The protective factors are that he has natural immunity against the virus, he knows about the vulnerability of the "Darkseekers" towards sunlight so he ventures out only during the daytime

and his pet Samantha gives him company initially and then Anna Montez and Ethan do so. The fact that Dr. Neville has indomitable spirit and is a diehard optimist makes him battle and champion all odds in the form of the virus causing the pandemic, the mutants and his loneliness. He is victorious on all the fronts till he succumbs to his death but that is only after he is able to develop the cure for the disease. The cure for the disease is a positive physical outcome and his indomitable spirit a positive psychological outcome. When Dr. Neville develops a cure derived from his own blood he sets a trap for a female “Darkseeker” who is the alpha female in the pack of vampiric, cannibalistic mutants, captures her, takes her to his laboratory, treats her but without success. The alpha male, the dominant male among the “Darkseekers” comes after him for his mate but has to go back into the shadows as he is blocked by the sunlight. The efforts of the alpha male to get back the alpha female shows that the mutants are not mindless and emotionless creatures as thought by Dr. Neville. The instance shows Dr. Neville’s brief exposure to risk in the form of the “Darkseekers” as he abducts the alpha female from their pack. The instance is said to be a steeling event because Dr. Neville disregards his concern about his own safety to find a test subject among the mutants so that he can test the cure developed by him on one of them. This exhibits his desperation to find cure for the malady afflicting the human population. He carefully plans the event so that he is successful in capturing the alpha female from among the mutants to make her a test subject. He shows self-control when he controls his fear and anxiety while capturing the alpha female from among the mutants. The way he strategizes to capture the female “Darkseeker” shows self-reflection because he is desperate to test the cure on a mutant so that he can launch it to save humanity. His sense of agency is reflected in the fact that he is not idle during the three years period but is active enough to experiment with his own blood which has natural immunity against the disease so that a cure can be developed. His self-confidence and determination in surviving against all odds including disease, mutants, isolation and

bereavement related to his family and developing the cure despite all the obstacles shows his grit and gumption. The several turning points of his life come when the pandemic begins, the loss of his wife and daughter in the helicopter crash during the rescue operation, his first encounter with the mutants, the development of the cure from his own blood, testing the cure on the female mutant, her positive response to the treatment, the coming in of Anna Montez and Ethan and finally handing the cure to them before death. All these turning points in his life show his increasing resilience. Dr. Neville is unique because of his genetics as he has natural immunity to Krippin virus, he has a dare devil personality as he is shown to possess a telescopic gun whenever he ventures out of his house and nothing stops him from daring the “Darkseekers”. Moreover, he has a scientific temperament as he is a virologist by profession. All these factors influence his resilience. His social relationships begin and end with Anna Montez and Ethan (*I Am Legend*).

Dr. Norman Garmezy (1918-2009) a clinical psychologist is the founder of research in resilience. His research was based at the University of Minnesota in the United States of America. The focus of his research was primarily on schizophrenia and mental illness which later shifted to stress resistance, competence and resilience. He was the founder of Project Competence, a longitudinal study into positive outcomes in at-risk children. His findings can also be used to define resilience in human adults which is of special consequence in the context of the scope of this research paper. He states that resilience is not impervious to stress but is designed to reflect recovery and maintain adaptive behavior after initial retreat or incapacity to cope up with a stressful event (*Current Theories relating to Resilience and Young People*). The most stressful event in the life of Dr. Neville is to lose his wife and daughter in the throes of the pandemic, the stress of losing them did affect him to a point of certain intensity as loneliness takes a toll on him and he keeps looking at the photographs of his wife and daughter, he keeps recollecting their memories



through flashbacks. He experiences the intensity of loneliness which is stressful for him and keeps it at bay through Samantha's company, talking to the mannequins and to the characters in the film recordings from the video stores. As a result, with the passage of time he is able to cope up with the stressful event of losing his family but later he gets human company in the form of Anna Montez and Ethan. His indomitable spirit to fight the pandemic in tooth and nail shows his resilience after the stressful event of losing his family. He does make a comeback to rout out the disease (*I Am Legend*).

Dr. Emmy Werner (1929-2017) who is a developmental psychologist and is a Professor Emerita in the University of California. Her longitudinal study of infants born in Kauai, Hawaii contributed to a groundbreaking study in resilience thereby proving that not all children succumb to adverse life events. She defines resilience as the ability of the individual's capability to cope the inner stresses of their vulnerabilities such as labile patterns of autonomic reactivity, developmental imbalances and unusual sensitivities and external stresses such as illness, major losses and dissolution of the family (*Current Theories relating to Resilience and Young People*). In the case of this media text, Ethan is a child who is exposed to the horror of the pandemic trying to cope up with the experiences when Philadelphia is overrun and people on the ship fall prey to the disease except for the Brazilian survivor Anna Montez and Ethan himself. They survive as both have natural immunity against the disease. The child is unusually quiet and his encounter with the mutants leaves him visibly shaken towards the end of the film which is an example of him trying to cope with his inner stresses. Moreover, Ethan is not shown to have a family as it is obvious that his family had perished as a result of the pandemic. The fact that both of them were able to maintain their sanity while they escaped from Dr. Neville's house carrying the cure for the disease to the survivor's camp in Bethel, Vermont is enough proof of their resilience (*I Am Legend*).

Dr. Suniya Luthar is Professor Emerita at Columbia University's Teacher College and

Foundation Professor of Psychology in the Arizona State University. Her research focusses on individuals affected by mental illness and poverty as well as affluent families. Her findings like the other researchers are based on resilience which is defined as a dynamic process encompassing a positive adaptation in the context of significant adversity. The two critical conditions to be resilient are exposure to significant threat and achievement of positive adaptation. Resilience is not a personal trait but a product of the environment (*Current Theories relating to Resilience and Young People*). In *I Am Legend*, the life story of Dr. Neville becomes a legend because of his survival against the odds of the pandemic till he attains victory before his death by developing the cure, successfully treating the female "Darkseeker" and handing it to Anna Montez and Ethan before his death. His positive adaptation is in the fact that he is able to channelize his mind and can focus on the development of the cure despite his emotional bereavement caused by the loss of his family during the pandemic (*I Am Legend*).

Dr. Ann Masten (1951-) is a clinical psychologist and Regents Professor in the Institute of Child Development at the University of Minnesota. She is the Director of Project Competence. Her research focusses on competence, risk, resilience and human development. She defines resilience as the capacity of a dynamic system to withstand, recover and adapt successfully from significant changes that threatens its stability, viability or development (*Current Theories relating to Resilience and Young People*). The pandemic pushed the human population to the brink of extinction thereby creating a new breed of albino vampiric mutants. The miniscule proportion of the human population that survived from the disease because of their natural immunity were also fast becoming the prey of the mutants. Thus, the system's stability, viability or development had been undermined under the effect of the pandemic but it will creep back to normalcy due to the cure developed by Dr. Neville. It may be interpreted as the resilience of Dr. Neville that got transferred to the system

making the system resilient to tide over the health crisis which became a pandemic involving the whole world (*I Am Legend*).

Dr. Michael Ungar (1963-) has worked as a social worker and family therapist for over 25 years and is presently the Professor of Social Work at Dalhousie University in Nova Scotia. He is the founder of the International Resilience Research Center in Canada which coordinates resilience research in over 14 countries. His research focusses on cross-cultural research, mixed methods, constructivism and resilience. He defines resilience as the outcome from negotiations between the individuals and their environments for the resources to define themselves as healthy amidst adverse conditions. The seven tensions of resilience are access to material resources, relationships, identity, power and control, social justice, cultural adherence and coherence. The emphasis is on environment's capacity to facilitate growth. The individual qualities are triggered or suppressed by the environment (*Current Theories relating to Resilience and Young People*). Dr. Neville, Anna Montez and Ethan were healthy even amidst the pandemic as a result of their natural immunity to the virus which is their natural resilience to the virus. Their exposure even to the mutants does not make them prone to the disease. The seven tensions of resilience as seen in the film text are: material resources, Dr. Neville stocks food and supplies in his house, his only relationship is initially to Samantha till Anna Montez and Ethan come in to rescue him from the "Darkseekers" and he forms new social relationships, he develops a cure thereby unintentionally establishing his identity, his natural immunity to the disease and his knowledge related to virology gives him power and control over the stressful circumstances as he is able to develop the cure from his blood, the social justice is the cure that he produces that would save mankind from the brink of extinction, a particular instance of cultural adherence may be seen in the fact that Dr. Neville is an Afro-American and his resilience in terms of fighting the disease may be derived from the resilience shown by his race in the long drawn struggle of the Afro-Americans from

the times of slavery to the present day in the predominantly white American society, Dr. Neville displays coherence in the way he conducts experiments to search for a cure in the basement laboratory and continues with his research till he develops the cure. The arrival of Anna and Ethan in the survivors' camp in Bethel, Vermont and they being greeted by the military officers and other survivors before Anna hands them the cure also displays coherence. The existence of a survivors' colony is proof of environment's capacity to facilitate growth and rejuvenation. Dr. Neville's individual qualities which makes his story a legend is triggered by the environment which is shown to be reeling under the effect of the pandemic.

A. Hunter conceptualizes resilience in a continuum with two poles namely less optimum resilience and optimum resilience. Less optimum resilience includes survival tactics of violence, high risk behaviors, and social and emotional withdrawal ("Resilience an Evolving Concept: A Review of Literature Relevant to Aboriginal Research"). The less optimum resilience as explained by A. Hunter is seen in the mutants as their survival tactics are violent showing their vampiric and cannibalistic propensities (*I Am Legend*).

T.S. Kuhn (1922-1996) and Paul Feyerabend (1924-1994) have challenged the belief that there is a steady progression of knowledge in the sciences and have instead projected an unsteady scientific progression from one discursive formation or paradigm to another. Thus, the scientists conduct and write their research within the conceptual limits of particular scientific discourses which are historically situated in relation to their society and culture (Selden 76). This particular aspect is illustrated in the media text *I Am Legend*, the fact that Lt. Col. Dr. Neville is a virologist conducting research to bring out the cure for Krippin's virus is supported by the fact that there are adverse circumstances which have been caused by the raging pandemic so the cure is in demand. The research to develop a cure for the disease is all the more the need of the hour because humanity is in a predicament of being wiped out

from the face of the Earth. The cure has to be developed within the stipulated time span. The natural immunity of those humans who are resistant to the virulent strain of the virus form the basis of Dr. Neville's research as he develops the cure from his own blood. The research that Dr. Neville conducts is within the conceptual limits of the scientific discourses which are prevalent at that point in time because the miniscule population of humans with natural immunity to the virus form the stepping stones to the gateway of the cure. Thus, the cure is developed from the natural immunity existing in a few humans. The mutants although shown to be diseased after being afflicted by the virus may suggest the way to human evolution. The scientific discourse within which the research is being done by Dr. Neville supports the preservation of homo sapiens rather than their extinction paving the way for further evolution. In fact, Dr. Neville cures the female mutant. The film is being revisited in the contemporary times as it is the times of the pandemic caused by COVID – 19 and an eminent vaccine is in the offing to save humanity thereby making the film text all the more relevant in the present times. Moreover, the mutants are shown to be the "other" as they are diseased and are thought to be mindless and emotionless creatures but they too display bonding as they come back for the female mutant who has been captured by Dr. Neville for clinical trials to test the efficacy of his cure. This shows the mutants to have emotions which is a sign of superior intelligence thereby indicating towards a possibility of human evolution but the prevailing scientific discourses focus on treating the mutants as diseased so that the species of homo sapiens can be preserved as it is (*I Am Legend*).

Michel Foucault (1926-1984) states that discourse is connected to power as discourse is considered to be the governing and ordering medium of every institution. Discourse determines the content of truth, the criteria of truth, who has the authority to speak and where the speech can be spoken (Selden 76). The media text is rooted in a discourse that foregrounds the preservation of the species, that is, homo sapiens focusing on their

survival skills during the pandemic, the research of Dr. Neville aims to save mankind from the brink of extinction, the mutants who are projected as diseased could be the humans who show signs of evolution hence they are called mutants or maybe they are better equipped to survive in the post-apocalyptic world or are more resilient but they are excluded on account of being diseased. Since the humans are at the top of the power pyramid the discourse of survival is in the favor of the humans and focusses on treating the mutants who are marginalized and seen as deviants in relation to the natural order as their bodily changes such as no melanin pigmentation, their vampiric and cannibalistic tendencies are seen as aberrations and not as features essential for survival in the changed scenario. It is the power of discourse working to keep the human beings in their respective place in a world dominated by human beings.

### Conclusion:

The film text *I Am Legend* explores the politics of survival leading to resilience during a pandemic. In the process of doing so it projects the power pyramid dominated by the humans and foregrounds the indomitable spirit of man to champion all odds during a calamity which threatens to wipe out humanity. Resilience as shown in this text is a product of risk in adverse situations and the will to live becomes the will to power. The positive adaptation involves taking the oppressive situations into one's stride and proposing a viable solution to end the existing adversity afflicting the system so that the system can creep back to normalcy. The text implicitly attempts to bring the mutants to the center of the power structure from a state of marginalization by showing them to be emotional thereby giving evidence of superior intelligence.

The theory of resilience in literature is a discourse that is interdisciplinary in nature. Resilience is basically defined as the ability of a living form from any species including human beings to adapt in the face of adversity. The nature of the adversity may be a physical or mental disease in the form of an epidemic or pandemic, an

environmental hazard, a natural calamity, an abrupt climactic change, a war or genocide, a political upheaval, a cataclysmic social or historical or economic or cultural event and any catastrophic event occurring in space. The theory of resilience follows two trajectories namely physical and psychological. The important factors related to the development of resilience are intensity and type of risk, time span, protection, survival, recovery and positive adaptation in the changed scenario. The major boosters that affect resilience are a rational approach, ability in terms of problem solving or resolving the stalemate, the access to material resources to build resilience, familial or social relationships or relationships in a community or a herd, identity, power and control, political or social justice, racial or cultural adherence, gender dynamics and coherence. The effect of resilience building brings about survival of the fittest in any condition whatsoever.

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